

NIAGARA.

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A Poem.

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NIAGARA.

I.

GRANDEST of Nature's works, her wildest wreck,
Or stateliest shrine! What ear, Niagara,
Thrills not? what eye unstartled shall survey
Thy loud and raging waters, as they break
Full o'er the fearful precipice, and whirl
Thy sea-green Naiads ^a in the gulf below?
Through many a stormy lake, ^b and boundless realm,
And well-fought field ^c thy winding currents flow,
Watering the woods, and herds, and creatures rude,
That haunt thy brink their hasty draught to steal:
And now for toil or pastime, float or keel,
Smooth as a glass expands th' united flood; ^d
That youth deluded by the flattering gleam,
Might trust with arm secure the tameness of thy stream.

II.

But, lo! the rocks—and, like a maniac moved,
 At once thy rage begins, and all around
 Vex'd by th' obstreperous waves thy shores resound;
 Check'd by the steadfast reef, as one reproved,
 More fierce the torrent raves, and flings his froth
 Aloft, and tosses on his flinty bed.
 Ill fares the wretch, * who there by night misled,
 Strives with strain'd oar against its matchless wrath:
 For close before him sinks the dreadful steep;
 O'er which th' Herculean stream† shall quickly hurl
 Him and his struggling bark, with headlong whirl,
 Dash'd on the turrets of the craggy deep,
 Many a dark fathom down. The stunning roar
 Ontario's‡ ramparts shakes, and Erie's distant shore.

III.

For as th' incessant and ear-rending clang,
 When war's red bolt conflicting navies urge,
 Rolls round the brows and caverns, that o'erhang
 The main, and mingles with the plunging surge :
 Or as 'mongst Alpine or Ceraunian peaks
 His angry trump the midnight thunder blows ;
 And rocks, and vales, and woods, and towering snows,
 Fling round the restless peal, while o'er them breaks
 From all heav'ns windows sluiced the rushing shower :
 Such noises loud and deep for ever rave
 Among those foaming waters, as they pour
 Down on that wrathful and tormented cave,^h
 Their smouldering crater, in whose ample bound
 As in some caldron huge they burst and boil around.

IV.

Up flies the steaming spray, and on the flood
 Sheds the dire umbrage of its winding shroud ;
 Yet ere to heaven it wreathes its hoary cloud,¹
 Far off conspicuous, in her wildest mood
 Sweet Iris^k wantons there, and sketches gay
 Many a bright segment of her tinted bow,
 That float their moment till the breezes blow
 The draft and shadowy tablet both away.
 Now stand we on the thin and dizzy ledge¹
 Self-poised and pendent o'er the black abyss,
 And lean, and listen by the torrent's edge,
 And watch its fall, and hear it roar and hiss,
 Like serpent foul^m whereof old sages sing,
 Or Hell's divan transformed to hail their venturous king.

V.

Descend we next to where the beetling cliffs
 Hang their high cornice o'er the margent steep,
 Whose uncouth slope their crumbling fragments heap,
 Sole track to yon dark portal,ⁿ that uplifts
 In gothic guise its pointed crown, and leads
 To the dread cloister, in whose vaulted groin
 The shelving beds and gushing billows join,
 And rock and river blend their arched heads.
 There crawl the slimy reptiles of the deep,
 Glazing th' obnoxious path, and dimly seen
 By the dull lantern of that drizzling skreen ;
 Through which day's beams with faint refraction peep,
 A baleful radiance pale, that gives the night
 Perplexing gleams obscure, the shades of tortured light.

VI.

Press not too far thy hardy search, nor trust

The doubtful chambers of that untried maze :

Know'st thou what base its leaning wall upstays ?

What floods lie hid behind ? what treacherous crust

Roofs the blind chasm, that cracks beneath thy tread ?

What blights may blast thee, what sub-aqueous sound

May mock thy echoing steps, thy sense astound ?

Or tempt thee where some rash adventurer dead

Lies wasting unentomb'd ? mark, what a blast

Bursts from the chilling entrance ! storm and shower

Breathe stern forbiddance from the jealous bower :

As if the demon of that cataract vast,

Sole anarch there, abhorr'd that tongue should tell

That mortal sight should pierce the secrets of his cell.

VII.

But now the Charon of the nether stream °

Waves his light oar, and wafts us o'er the tide.

With staggering step we scale the rugged side,
Fast by yon lofty ridge ; o'er whose broad beam

With stealthy lapse at first the glassy plane ♪

In one bright sheet descends, then streaming all

With tresses green, that whiten as they fall,
Dash'd to ten thousand dews and dusts of rain,
Breaks on the crags beneath, its rugged floor,

The ruins of its rage ; through whose hoarse caves

And countless crannies forced the foaming waves,

'Scaped their Tarpeian pitch, ♪ with fresh uproar
Rush headlong down, and deeper as they swell
The mixt majestic choir, that shakes that wondrous dell.

VIII.

Between the branches of the horned flood
 With shade of loftiest growth and sunny smile,
 Commingling graced a cool sequester'd isle,
 Crowns the high steep, and from its echoing wood
 Proclaims the tumults of the restless vale
 Far round, and calm as Dian's argent brow
 Brush'd by the clouds, o'erlooks the storm below.
 There many a stranger woos the breathing gale,
 Worn with his toilsome ramble: there, they say,
 Stern Winter oft his shining armoury¹ rears,
 Framed in his icy forge; with crystal spears
 And diamond lances hangs each bending spray,
 Each trunk with mail, or helm, or buckler bright,
 By man's slow toils unmatch'd, the fabric of a night.

IX.

Back o'er the bridge,¹ which daring art has thrown
Wide o'er the brawling pass (whose yesty streams
Flash through each crevice of the dancing beams)

We haste : the sleepless torrent hurrying on
Tow'rds its high leap, and whirling on its way
Th' uprooted pine and oak. The scaly herds
Against it tire their powerless helms : the birds
Of strongest flight, down stooping for their prey
On that disastrous current, rise no more.

Caught by the liquid hurricane they strain

Their ineffectual wings, and flap in vain ;

With screams unnatural tow'rds th' increasing roar.

Forced on at length in silence down they go,
And glut th' insatiate gorge, that yawns and yells below.

X.

There lifeless oft the wanderers of the wave
In glittering shoals are seen ; there sylvan stores,
Swoln beasts, and fractured beams, which to their shores
Wreck'd from those fatal heights the waters lave,
Or waft promiscuous down, where now between
Their towering banks, " far from the wrath behind,
Hurrying as if dismay'd and dark they wind
Their deep contracted deluge.—Pregnant scene !
Wherein fall'n power its own sad act may trace ;
Power, that by bounteous heaven from obscure source
Advanced, with boundless rule and headlong course
Long flows ; by ills at times, the rocks of grace,
Check'd, not chastised, still pours its fortunes on,
Wherewith the world resounds, and topples from its throne.

XI.

A turbid solitude succeeds, uncheer'd
By Fame's retiring trump, that loud no more,
But makes despair more joyless : as the roar
Of yon high-falling flood remotely heard,
Saddens the troubled stream, that groans below.
There, save that lonely skiff, no swelling sail
Leans her coy bosom from the wanton gale ;
Lest with its eddying ebb her helpless prow
The reflux tide should seize, and drift above
To th' howling base of that pernicious steep,
Plunged in its whelming shower, who knows how deep ?
Or whirl'd how long upon its watery wheel !
In the dark dungeon of that hideous cove ;
Whence scarce the buoyant Muse retrieves her vent'rous keel.

XII.

Niagara, such art thou : to equal thee,
 What are the brooks of Wales, or statelier Clyde,^v
 Or Anio, or Velino,^w or the tide
 That shoots the slopes of Nile?^x thy breadth a sea,
 Thy shock an earthquake, and thy awful voice
 The sound of many waters. Grand and bold
 Columbia thus, the child of Nature's choice,
 Scales all her wonders to the Rhodian mould.^y
 Her lakes are oceans, every stream a bay,
 Wide through her frame its branching artery throws :
 Her mountains kiss the moon : her sapient sway
 A beauteous belt^z hath wrought, whose ties enclose
 Tribes without end, realm after realm embraced
 In Freedom's opening arms, the savage and the waste.

NOTES.



^a *Thy sea-green Naiads.*

The colour of the falling water at Niagara, though of course perfectly fresh, is a beautiful sea-green.

^b *Through many a stormy lake, &c.*

The river Niagara, which supplies the falls, may be traced through many lakes, and particularly lakes Superior, Huron, and Erie, the former about 1600, and each of the two latter about 800, miles in circumference. About fourteen miles below the falls it empties itself into Lake Ontario, but little inferior in dimensions to Lake Erie.

^c *And well-fought field.*

This river, and the lakes through which it flows, being originally a natural, as they are now a conventional boundary, between the American and Canadian territories, have been the scene of many well-known actions between the Indians, French, and English, and between the latter and the United States.

c

o *Th' united flood.*

About five miles below lake Erie, the river Niagara is divided into two streams forming an island, called Grand Island, about 12 miles long, and nearly as wide ; below which they are re-united into one broad and smooth expanse, which continues about two miles, till it reaches the rapids ; down which it runs through reefs of rocks falling about fifty feet in the course of the last mile ; it is then again divided by a small island, called Goat Island, and falls on each side of it over the precipices which form the Great Cataracts.

o *Ill fares the wretch, &c.*

In November, 1821, two men (supposed to be intoxicated) fastened their boat to a wooden bridge across the Chippeway Creek, (which empties itself into the Niagara on the Canadian side, about two miles above the falls,) and fell asleep. By some means, the boat being probably ill-secured, got loose with the men in it, and drifted into the rapids ; where they awoke in the greatest agitation, and were hurried over the falls, and lost. A table, which they had on board, was seen a few days afterwards floating down the stream ; but neither the boat, nor either of the men has ever been heard of since.

† *Th' Herculean stream.*

Alluding not only to the size and strength of the cataract, but to the well-known story of Hercules, who in his last frenzy flung Lichas, his attendant, from the top of Mount Æta, in Greece, into the sea between Locris and Eubæa.—*Ovid's Met.* lib. 9. l. 211. *Milt. Par. Lost*, b. 2. l. 544.

g Ontario's ramparts, &c.

Fort George, situated on the Canadian, and Fort Niagara on the American side of the river Niagara, at its entrance into Lake Ontario, distant about fourteen, as its outlet from Lake Erie is about twenty miles from the falls. At both these points their sound is often heard like distant thunder, particularly in calm weather, and in the stillness of the night.

h Tormented cave.

The cataract next to the Canadian shore is nearly in the shape of a horse-shoe, or of the pit of a modern theatre ; and if the reader will suppose the water to pour over from the gallery and upper side boxes, one hundred and fifty feet perpendicular, he will have some idea of the shape, but none whatever either of the magnitude or of the noise of this stupendous fall, or of the unapproachable, vast cavern which ingulfs it. Its circuit is about 800 or 900, and its chord about 300 yards, from one point of the horse-shoe to the other.

i Its hoary cloud.

The clouds of spray, which are perpetually hovering over these cataracts, are often seen at Buffaloe on Lake Erie as far as their sound is heard. See Note g.

k Sweet Iris, &c.

Portions of rainbows are often seen at these falls, varying according to the position of the sun. The author saw many, and particularly observed a small segment of one about ten

feet high, rising to the upper skirt of the spray-cloud, that sustained it, and resting its lower end upon the surface of the torrent, as if it grew out of the water. In an instant the wind shifted, the vapour was dispersed, and the brilliant image vanished like a spirit.

¹ *The thin and dizzy ledge.*

This is a thin plate or slab of rock, projecting from the high bank on the Canadian side, upon a level with, and close by the end of, the horse-shoe fall. It overhangs the base of the cliff, on which it rests, 48 feet; and is the perilous place to which every visiter is conducted, as the most favourable point for viewing the whole, or at least the grandest part, of this indescribable scene.

^m *Like serpent foul, &c.*

See Ovid's Met. lib. 3. l. 48. Pind. Ol. Od. 8. Ep. 2, and Milt. Par. Lost, b. 10. l. 505, and Sequel.

ⁿ *To yon dark portal.*

This is a dark opening formed by the hanging rock, and shooting cataract, in the shape of a lofty gothic arch; under which the author, after several anxious but unsuccessful efforts, was prevented from proceeding more than a few yards, by the violent tempest of wind and rain, which continually issues from it. To account for this singular phenomenon is not easy; it seemed, however, to the author, that the innumerable columns and fragments of air, which are intermingled with, and forced

down by the falling water, must necessarily release themselves at the bottom ; and that half of them at least must force their way into the passage between the cataract and the rock. Out of this prison they have no other vent but through the vaulted opening, where the author encountered the irresistible storm, which all visitors experience, and the cause of which he is unable to explain upon any other principle.

• *The Charon of the nether stream.*

After walking down the stream from the horse-shoe cataract on the Canadian side, about half a mile, you are opposite to the cataract on the American side, which is separated from the former by Goat Island. The reader will observe, that the river runs westward towards the falls, and then turns suddenly to the north ; so that the line of the falls is almost diagonal across the elbow of the river ; and consequently the visiter, after looking at the horse-shoe fall on the Canadian or western side, must go downwards on that side some way before he can be opposite to the cataract on the American side. He then descends from the cliffs near 200 feet to the water's edge, where a single ferryman rows him in a little wherry across the eddying torrent, and lands him just below the latter cataract.

• *The glassy plane, &c.*

This branch of the cataract breaks off nearly in an even line from the American side towards Goat Island, falls upon a shapeless pile of rocks, that have been precipitated from above, and rushes through their various openings into the lower river.

¶ *'Scaped their Tarpeian pitch.*

It is almost unnecessary to inform the reader, that the Tarpeian rock was the precipice of the Capitol at Rome, over which great criminals were sometimes thrown.

¶ *A cool sequestered isle.*

This is Goat Island, consisting of about twenty acres of lofty wood, and belonging to Judge Porter; who has, with great skill and spirit thrown a wooden bridge, resting on 7 or 8 piers, from the American shore to a small island, distant about 500 yards, and from thence another, about one third as long, to Goat Island. To this interesting spot the visiter may now fearlessly resort, and standing on the precipice at its western end, find himself placed between the two cataracts, looking down 160 feet perpendicular upon the nether torrent.

¶ *His shining armoury rears.*

Since this little poem was written, the author has observed this expression, of which he was quite unconscious, in Cowper's Task, b. 5. It is, however, used there to introduce a train of thoughts so very different, that he does not feel himself open to the charge of plagiarism in suffering it to remain. The clouds of spray which are always rising from these stupendous falls, are speedily congealed during the winter, and settle on the neighbouring trees, casing the trunks with coats of ice, and hanging the branches with a thousand icicles.

t Back o'er the bridge.

This bold fabric was constructed by protruding long beams of timber horizontally from the bank, and sending out men on the ends, which hung over the water, (and which were counterpoised with heavy weights placed on the ends that rested on the land,) for the purpose of driving piles, or fixing upon a pier of rock for their support. This being accomplished, a second set of beams were protruded in the same manner from the extremity of the first, till a second pier was gained; a third followed, and, by a repetition of the same process, the whole structure was completed.

u Their towering banks, &c.

For the space of about seven miles from the falls to Queenstown, the river, or rather torrent, rushes along between two rows of cliffs, rising to the height of 200 feet; through which during a series of ages it seems to have worn or torn its way. From hence some, with much appearance of reason, have supposed, that the falls were originally at Queenstown, where the level of the country sinks almost suddenly to a flat but a little higher than the surface of the river; and that as the rocky bed of the latter has given way and deepened, the falls have gradually receded to their present site.

v The brooks of Wales, or statelier Clyde.

There are many picturesque and interesting waterfalls in Wales, one at a most romantic place called the Devil's Bridge, falling above 300 feet; but very few of them fall 100 feet, and the streams which supply them are but rivulets or very narrow

rivers, the largest not exceeding 50 yards in breadth, and very few of them above twenty. The Clyde in Scotland is a large river for that country, but the fall is not great.

¶ *Anio or Velino.*

The celebrated falls of Tivoli, near Rome, upon which so many pencils and pens have been employed, are formed by the descent of the headlong Anio, (Strabo, lib. 5, 364,) as the Cascata del Marmore of Terni is by that of the Velino. See Lord Byron's *Childe Harold*, canto 4, stan. 69.

✱ *The slopes of Nile.*

Modern travellers inform us, that the cataracts of the Nile are not precipitous, but that they merely pour down a rocky declivity, not much exceeding in steepness some of the rapids of America.

γ *The Rhodian mould.*

Alluding to the celebrated Colossus at Rhodes, a brazen statue of Apollo, 105 feet high.

✱ *A beauteous belt.*

Meaning the federative principle, by which so many states and territories have been, and so many more may be, added to the American union.

